



Leadership Enrichment Series

Elder Dallin H. Oaks

A Conversation on Rendering an Account

August 16, 2011

BROTHER RALPH CHRISTENSEN: I'd like to welcome you to this leadership enrichment series, which will be a conversation on rendering an account. In this conversation we'll have opportunity to explore—both from the point of view of the manager or the leader and from the point of view of the employee—how to engage in this most important conversation.

I want to acknowledge Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, who will be teaching us and instructing us. Elder Oaks, it's a privilege to be with you and to have you here with us this morning. I've asked Brother Berne Broadbent, Managing Director of Intellectual Properties, to offer the prayer for us this morning.

(Prayer)

The intent for this series, a Leadership Enrichment Series, is to receive instructions on key elements of the leadership pattern. And just by way of reminder, the leadership pattern was created in conversation between leaders in the Human Resource Department, as well as members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, the First Presidency as members of the human resource committee, and the Presiding Bishopric, where we talked at length about what were the qualities and the qualifications that the leaders were looking for in us as leaders of the workforce. That's the background of this pattern.

We come here to receive instruction on key elements of that leadership pattern. Today we're going to ponder and talk about ways to create an environment of accountability in the workplace. Our intent is to have this be, as the previous sessions, an informal kind of a conversation. There's going to be lots of opportunity for interaction with Elder Oaks.

I would encourage us in this session that it be more than just an interesting conversation, while I think it will be that. The primary intent is that we walk away from here with both insights and ways to be better, stronger leaders in the responsibilities that we have. I would encourage us that we listen both to the words that are said, but, perhaps most importantly, that we seek the Spirit to teach us. There will be things that the Spirit will teach us as individuals that might be unique or different one from another, and we would encourage us to be open for those promptings. We'd also encourage us to be prepared to go back to our workgroups and take time with the videos that will be made available and the transcripts and to talk together in our workgroups about how we can apply the principles that will be discussed today.

The third thing that I would mention would be to go to the pattern of leadership website, which you can find at the Church intranet under "Leadership Development." This is a tool that's been developed to give the opportunity to take any leadership pattern and find resources that can help us learn and improve in areas that we might individually need some improvement.

So with that, our format, as I mentioned, will be as we've done in the past. I've got a handful of questions, some of which came from some of you, that I will pose to Elder Oaks. He and I had a very enjoyable opportunity to talk about some of these questions. And I've already gone through some of my learning, which has been a great opportunity.



Following those questions, we will have plenty of time for question and answer. There will be a number of microphones throughout the audience. And so if you have a question, we'd encourage you to raise your hand so the people with the microphones can come to you and be ready for the question that you would raise. At the conclusion of that, Elder Oaks will conclude with his testimony. Following Elder Oaks' final comments, Reid Neilson from the Church History Department will offer the benediction.

Now I'm going to forgo any lengthy introduction of Elder Oaks. We've come to know and love Elder Oaks as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and a teacher of doctrine. I know that I for one, Elder Oaks, am deeply grateful for the things I've learned from you. I would just mention, however, that in addition to the many ecclesiastical assignments Elder Oaks has had, he's also had a great number of assignments in the business setting that have kind of pressed him to apply and use some of the things that we're going to be talking about today. He has served as Executive Director of the American Bar Foundation, President of Brigham Young University, Chairman of the Board of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), and Chairman of the Board of the Polynesian Cultural Center. Elder Oaks, it is marvelous to have you here with us. So why don't we begin with a couple of the questions we have prepared, if that would be okay.

THE GOAL IS PERFECTION

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: The first question, Elder Oaks, is that it can be tempting at times—and sometimes almost easy—to set safe, low standards against which we would be measured. It is tempting to do that. How does the Lord approach setting standards?

ELDER OAKS: It seems to me like the basic doctrinal background for that question is the Lord's statement that we should be perfect. "Be ye therefore perfect" (Matthew 5:48). And as a result, if we apply that principle to a Church calling, and certainly to Church employment, we should realize that anyone who performs anything for the Lord must do so "with all [his] heart, might, mind and strength" (D&C 4:2). (Seems like I read that somewhere.) And spare no effort toward that end. And that is the setting for our meeting today. None of us will achieve perfection, but it's quite clear that that's the goal, that's the ideal toward which we strive, and that ideal applies just as well to being a Church employee as it does toward being Young Women president or a counselor in the bishopric.

The principle of accountability is inherent in that. The scriptures are replete with teachings that we will be accountable for the use of our talents and the fulfillment of our responsibilities. I don't need to review those scriptures; they're familiar to all of you—more explicit in the Doctrine and Covenants than they are in the earlier scriptures. I've been impressed with a particular reading of the 107th section of the Doctrine and Covenants that's relevant to this consideration. In the 99th and 100th verses we have a familiar verse, "Wherefore, now let every man learn his duty, and to act in the office in which he is appointed, in all diligence." To "learn [the] duty" and "to act" indicates that this is not an academic study.

President Boyd K. Packer once gave me a very penetrating criticism of a talk I was preparing. I gave it to him and he read it, and I went in for comments. He said, "Well, I have just a two-word question about your talk. Therefore, what?" I hadn't taught what we do about it. I was teaching it at an academic level. And I often think of those two words; they're always written inside my lenses as I look at what I've written. "Therefore, what?" What do we do about it? I would suggest that in light of D&C 107:99 and in light of that question, we think about learning our duty and *acting* in the office which we are appointed. "He that is slothful shall not be counted worthy to stand," the scripture continues (D&C 107:100).



Now I'd like to go back and read that same scripture and emphasize a different word that is also relevant to our duties. "Wherefore, now let every man learn *his* duty, and to act in the office in which *he* is appointed, in all diligence." And the point of that emphasis is that sometimes we're tempted to act in someone else's office and try to contemplate someone else's duty. So if you stress that part of it, it has a wonderful emphasis on "look to yourself; what are you going to do about it when you've learned your duty; and don't try to act in someone else's calling or dwell on somebody else's duty—dwell on your own."

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: Thank you. You know, we've related to that.

LOOK GOOD OR BE GOOD?

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: I suspect that some of the reason we may be tempted to set lower standards is that we may want to look good, and lower standards might give us the opportunity to look better. I think there's a difference between wanting to look good and wanting to be good. I'd be interested, Elder Oaks, in your sense of how do we keep focus on where we really should be between looking good and, in fact, being good?

ELDER OAKS: I've just participated in both of those challenges. Before I came on the stage, someone powdered my head so that I could look good (laughs). Now Ralph Christensen asks me a question that requires me to focus on being good. Well, I guess we all have the challenge of not giving primary emphasis to looking good, not in the sense of appearance, but in the sense of performance. And that contrasts with being good. It seems to me, in Church employment and Church service, in contrast to the world and many that live in it who focus on looking good, the Church and its members must focus on being good. To achieve being good we must be open and anxious to receive and to give correction. Those are subjects we'll be discussing a little bit later in my response to some questions that will be forthcoming.

I was impressed with something I read that President David O. McKay said as an illustration of being good. Being good requires us to focus on others. Looking good tempts us to focus on ourselves. But the first step toward being good is to focus on others. President McKay taught that principle when he said that persons are not called or appointed to their positions to benefit themselves. "When a call is made [or I would say when an offer is extended in the employment setting], it is made to bless someone, some class, or humanity at large. ... Everyone holds his [or her] position to build up, to bless, to establish righteousness, purity, and virtue among mankind."¹ That I think is the essential thing to bear in mind. Are we doing it for ourselves, or are we doing it in fulfillment of our responsibilities and to bless the lives of others?

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: Thank you. As you were speaking, I'm reminded of the Lord's dealing with the Pharisees on this topic. He was very concerned with their desires to look good on the outside and not focus on the heart. Thank you.

PERFORMANCE GAPS

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: Some would identify performance gaps both in our temporal work lives and in our spiritual lives as well. Some seem almost devastated when performance gaps are identified. We'd be interested in your thoughts on how we should school our hearts to deal with our performance gaps, and in fact, each of these questions have dealt with the heart. Because it is hard to receive correction, how do we better be prepared to receive that?



ELDER OAKS: Well, I think the first step in dealing with the problem of performance gaps—whether it is our own or those we supervise—is to recognize that we should look for opportunities to have performance gaps identified. Why? Because that’s part of the Lord’s plan for growth. The attitude of being satisfied with the current situation is negative toward our growth or the growth of those with whom we work and whom we supervise. So performance gap identification, communication, discussion, and so on is an essential part of the growth that we’re put here to experience in mortality. It’s not our enemy.

In Doctrine and Covenants, section 95, verse 1, the Lord says, “Verily, thus sayeth the Lord unto you whom I love, and whom I love I also chasten . . . , for with the chastisement I prepare a way for their deliverance in all things.” Now, we can think of chastening as scolding, or we can think of chastening as holding us up to the standards expected for the performance, and the chastisement is a challenge to use that vision of the difference between performance and the ideal as a way to grow. And in this verse the Lord promised to help us do just that. The Prophet Joseph Smith similarly said, “I frequently rebuke and admonish my brethren, and that because I love them, not because I wish to incur their displeasure, or mar their happiness.”² That’s another illustration of that principle.

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: That’s a great comment. I think that as we receive that chastisement, sometimes we can take that so personally and have this negative kind of a reaction as a receiver of it.

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: The next question though, I think, is as a giver of a correction sometimes that might be needed. How do we as leaders with employees deal with them around correction in the spirit of mercy, forgiveness, love, and hope, while not avoiding the issue that there is a need for performance improvement? I actually think that we’ve got opportunities to be far better than the world because of our understanding of the doctrine of these principles.

ELDER OAKS: That’s surely true. I approach that question knowing it is a difficult one, and I’ve not been as good at that as I’d like to be. Talking to people I work with about their deficiencies is very difficult for me. So it’s a lot easier for me to invite them to talk to me about my deficiencies, but it’s harder for me to get a response on that. That’s why the Lord gave us spouses (laughs). My experience is that there’s less resistance there. I’d like to tie what we’re discussing to humility before I go directly to what you just asked. Humility is a willingness to receive correction and council, and if we’re humble, if we can cultivate that attitude in ourselves, then we will be in a better position to receive correction. And if we can encourage humility in those we work with, they’ll be in a better position to absorb that kind of correction.

I want to give an example from my own experience of what I would call “hungering and thirsting,” a phrase that President Spencer W. Kimball used—that I will come back to in a moment—hungering and thirsting for evaluation. In an early time in my life, a very formative period, I was blessed with an appointment as a law clerk, a legal assistant to the chief justice of the United States, Earl Warren. I graduated from law school, and I was one of three graduates in that year who went right to work for the chief justice of the United States. I adored him. He’s got a bad reputation among conservatives, of which I’m one, because he made a lot of legal judgments that I think have been bad for the country. In judicial activism, he’s kind of the father. The Warren Court, so-called, is the father of judicial activism. I found myself disagreeing with him more often than not on his legal judgments, but I adored him as a person. He was a wonderful family man, a great lover of his country, and very, very skillful in treating the people who worked for him. I loved him as a boss, but I often found myself disagreeing with what he did in the position he held.

Now that’s a background to say that the one thing I longed for in working with him was a word of evaluation; he was not good at that. In the entire year that I worked closely with him—seeing him several times a day, and doing work for him, and bringing it back, and getting direction. For the entire year I didn’t receive one single word of criticism.



And I didn't receive any praise either. That didn't bother me so much. I could live without that, but I needed criticism in order to improve, and I longed for that. The only evaluation I ever received from him was at the end of the year when he said, "Would you please stay for another year?" I took that as a positive reading, but in the meantime I'd accepted another job, so I couldn't do it.

However, I know the truth of President Kimball's words, which I will read to you now. He said, "I find myself hungering and thirsting for just a word of ... honest evaluation from my superiors and my peers. I want no praise; I want no flattery; I am seeking only to know if what I gave was acceptable."³ And, I might add, how I can improve. I began by saying that's been hard for me to do for the people with whom I work, but stimulated by this experience that I've related, I've tried hard to do that because I know it's essential to those with whom we work. It's essential to the people whom you supervise. And you do them a favor if you do it. All that is a background to the question you asked. Repeat that question, and I'll try to answer it.

HONEST EVALUATION

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: How do we as leaders talk with our employees about performance issues in the spirit of mercy, forgiveness, love, and hope and not avoid the hard conversation?

ELDER OAKS: I think the first principle in reproof or correction is to communicate authentically to the person we're working with that we know that they want to be better. An alternate way to communicate that is to say, "I've watched your work and there's something you're doing wrong, and I'm going to tell you what it is." But if we say, "I know you want to be the very best you can be"—we're starting off with praise, really, and then in that context—"because I know you want to do better, I want to point out something that would make you more effective," and so on. I think that's a good way to begin.

The second thing I would suggest is to be positive. Employees will have confidence in themselves when their leaders communicate confidence in their ability to perform. And that's not just the individual you have confidence in, it's confidence in our team, our section, our department. We can do the job. Confidence is another good building block in offering reproof or correction.

Inherent in that is the third suggestion I make, which is to view performance gaps or deficiencies as challenging opportunities. Here's something good that's come along. We've seen a way that you (or we) can do things better.

Fourth is training—what we're involved in right here. Everyone is reluctant to do what he or she doesn't know how to do. And so it's well for us to remember that motivation. Someone once said it takes one part inspiration and nine parts education. If we know what is expected, if we have been taught how to do it, that's the best motivation.

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: That's very helpful. One of the things that I've felt as you're speaking is the need to have the difficult conversations. But you're talking about it in such a positive way and in such a helpful way, which I think is what—when you and I talked together—we talked about the Atonement and these principles of hope and that we can have these conversations in a spirit of hopefulness and encouragement and real love. In fact, the quote you gave from Joseph Smith is that "I do this because I love them." I'm fairly convinced that our greatest expression of love to our employees is when we can help them be better. If there are deficiencies and we let them continue on the path that they're on and they don't get better, I believe we're thinking more about ourselves than them. If we love them, we will help them be better. I think that's how the Lord feels about us.



ELDER OAKS: Absolutely. Whatever we deliver in the way of these suggestions that I've made, it should be packaged in love, and it better be genuine! If it's a genuine feeling of "I care for you," it's going to magnify the effect of all the things that you do. Love is the magnifier for two reasons. First of all, we're in the service of the Lord, and if we're His servants and His leaders, we better not be doing His work in our way; we better be doing it in His way. And His way is love. The other thing is that you can just get more done with people by loving them than by disliking them. My father-in-law had a saying. He was a banker and supervised people. I've often heard him say that you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. That was his way of expressing the fact that if you want to get a job done, sweetness is a lot better way to get it done than sourness.

SHARING BAD NEWS

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: Next question: One of the most difficult things employees have to do is to report negative results to their managers. What counsel would you give us that will help us when we have to give bad news that could potentially reflect negatively on either our leaders or ourselves? And if I might say, in particular, when I think about how many of us have the opportunity to work with the Brethren, we want things to look so good for you. My experience is that many of the Brethren have said to just tell it to me straight. So, how do we balance this inclination to make things look good with how do we give them bad news—if it is in fact?

ELDER OAKS: I first want to confirm what you've said that the leaders of the Church want to be told the way it is. And when I say that, I'm talking about the job and the assigned responsibility. We want total honesty in that. That doesn't mean that when you have a meeting with Elder so-and-so, that you should tell him the way it is in your ward, or the way it is in your family, or whatever. You have channels to deal with that. Sometimes people use that access for purposes other than what was intended. If you have an employment issue to present or a policy issue to present, stay with that. But in staying with that, tell it the way it is—in the context that you have been asked to report—and you'll do a great favor and you'll be doing what the people you deal with want you to do. Even if they've had a pet theory that you've tried in a pilot way and it hasn't worked, they want to know it hasn't worked. You don't have to say that it was a bum idea. You just can present the facts, from which they can make that conclusion.

We've descended from lofty generalities, and we're getting into the hard specifics now, which is the reason you've taken the sequence you've taken in leading us through this. I would say that if you have bad news to share, it's well to give some careful consideration to your timing in sharing it. On some issues timing is pretty close to the value of telling the truth. Telling it like it is, is number one, but choosing the right time to do it is number two. And number two is close behind number one. There's some times when people can absorb bad news better than other times, so look to your timing. Sometimes the timing will be driven by the fact that the boss is going into a meeting and he has to know this in that meeting, so the timing may be driven by that. But if the timing is not driven by some external consideration, plan carefully to deliver bad news when someone is fresh, when it's early in the morning, when they're in a good mood, or whatever it may be. Timing is important.

Make sure in any and all events—when you're delivering bad news—that you've eliminated the reality or the perception of any personal agenda in what you have to share. Sometimes people delivering bad news seem to have too much personal interest in that news. And I will tell you from my experience that it's a lot harder for me to digest bad news from someone who seems to be pleased about it than it is someone who is objective in delivering it. So, those are two thoughts—the timing and the elimination of the reality or the perception of a personal agenda in the way things turned out.



BRO. CHRISTENSEN: That's very helpful. You don't want to find joy in the demise of some plan or in some idea.

ELDER OAKS: Exactly.

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: The other thing I noticed is that in several of your comments you've linked the providing of input or critique to the purpose and the goal. My experience is that is really helpful because it takes it out of being a personal conversation and puts it back into the context of "here's what we're trying to accomplish," and we either are or are not doing that. I've found that helps a lot—to take it out of a personal conversation and focus in on what we're trying to accomplish.

ELDER OAKS: Indeed.

HURT OR DEFENSIVE?

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: One of the other things that happens—again speaking of real specifics—is that probably most of us have found ourselves in a conversation with an employee where there is some critique or some conversation about a problem in performance, and the employee may react defensively, may burst out into tears. This may become an emotional experience, and that's the reality of some of our jobs. Any counsel that you would have on how to help the employee who feels hurt or defensive in such a conversation?

ELDER OAKS: Most of what I have to say on that question fits within the various suggestions I made earlier, which were preventive. This is a question of how you would cure the problem if it occurs. The best way to cure it is to prevent it. "I know you want to do better. I want to help you. This is a great opportunity, and I love you." All those are preventative, but the last one—love—is curative. And a follow-up conversation, the scheduling of a follow-up conversation, can be curative and helpful, especially if the person has an emotional reaction. If we're emotional, we've communicated that we're not able to absorb all of the correction that we've been told, and surely that is not a good setting in which to outline all the things that you are expected to do as a result of this. It may be that you have to have two meetings—one to communicate the bad news and allow it to be digested. And then have a follow-up meeting that demonstrates your genuine care (in the scheduling of two meetings instead of one). That gives a little time for the person to get ready to absorb the positive suggestions that are being made.

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: Thank you.

SETTING GOALS

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: At a very practical level, Elder Oaks, what have you learned about setting and achieving goals?

ELDER OAKS: Well, I think that in setting goals—and I believe very much in goal setting—it's very important to set the right kind of goals. Goal setting is not an abstract. Sometimes setting a goal can make matters worse instead of make matters better. President Barbara Smith of the Relief Society made a statement once that I wrote down and cherish. She said, "Goals are stars to steer by, not sticks to beat yourself with." That expresses both the positive and the negative aspect of goal setting. Good goals are an impetus for progress. Bad goals are just sources of frustration.



To be most effective in furthering personal progress, our goals should concern things that can be attained by our personal efforts. This difference is very important because if we pursue a goal that we can achieve by what we do in the exercise of our agency and our efforts, then it's fair for us to be measured against that goal. And it is the kind of goal that guides our efforts and can give us satisfaction or further correction.

If we have set goals that are dependent upon the agency or actions of others, then the failure to attain them can just produce frustration or ill will internally. So, I think the overriding principle in goal setting—and I teach this to missionaries and try to practice it myself—the overall principle is to set goals that are attainable by your agency and your efforts. Now, I'm talking personally. Departments, sections, and so on can set joint goals and a participatory process and everybody contributes to them, but I have been talking about personal goals.

ROLE OF TRUST

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: Thank you. I would propose, if it would be all right, that we move to some questions from the audience. We may come back to a couple of these other ones if that would be okay. Where are our microphones? Do we have some questions that people would like to pose for Elder Oaks?

ELDER OAKS: Let me comment.

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: Please.

ELDER OAKS: Let me just give a comment that I sometimes give when I am involved in a question/answer session in a stake leadership meeting of some sort. I encourage you to ask general questions, and if you do, I will answer them because I am a General Authority (laughs). If you ask a specific question, I'll refer it to the stake president because he's the specific authority. So bear in mind that your friend Ralph Christensen is likely to get the reference if you ask a question that is highly specific.

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: I love a really good general question. Please.

QUESTION: What is the role of trust, and what is the counsel for both the manager or the employee in developing that environment of trust in addressing this particular topic?

ELDER OAKS: It's a good question. I should have mentioned it earlier. It's a part of the climate in which we work. Trust is a first cousin to love, which is another illustration of the climate of candor and confidence. Trust is one of those elements that contributes to the general climate. It also results from the general climate. But in all that we do, we need to be careful to help those we work with to trust us and to communicate to them the fact that we trust them. We can encourage trust in a number of different ways, such as sharing the credit that comes to us in our team as a result of our efforts.

If there's anything that will destroy trust in a leader, it's for those they work with to conclude that this leader accepts all the credit and delegates all the blame. And I've seen people whose leadership style was that way. They'll accept the credit, but they undertake to delegate the blame. I won't trust that leader.

Sharing confidences increases trust. It increases the workers' trust in the leader by saying "I am going to share with you the things you need to know." And it also demonstrates the trust the leader has in the worker—that they will not abuse



the confidence. Now, we don't share everything that we're told in confidence, but when we can and we share everything that we can, that increases trust and the feeling that we want to have from others toward us and from us toward others.

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: One thought to that point that I have tried to make is that my first premise will be that I'm going to choose to trust that this person can and will do their work and their job well, as opposed to that I need to do it for them or I need to give them more help than they're asking for, as a first premise. At the same time, one needs to be trustworthy if they're going to expect trust. I think it's difficult to expect trust when our behavior time after time is not worthy of that trust. Is that right?

ELDER OAKS: Oh, yes. And I think we have all worked with people on our team whom we learned we could not trust. Or we could not trust them with this particular segment of the work, or we can't trust them with this particular confidence. That's something that needs to be communicated if it can be. That's a performance gap. It's a very sensitive one to try to deal with. It's very hard to call a person in and say, "I didn't tell you this because I learned earlier, as a result of ABC, that I couldn't trust you. You talk too much. You share things you shouldn't share, or you use this for personal purposes or gain when this is a resource of knowledge or opportunity that belongs to the organization." You notice that I'm using words that don't just apply to the Church. A lot of the things, as Brother Christensen's introduction indicated, I've learned through public broadcasting service or through working at BYU or the Polynesian Cultural Center and so on.

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: Thank you.

PRESIDENTS' DIFFERENT STYLES

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: The next question. While we're passing the microphone, if during the response you can have a hand up if you have a question, then we'll be ready for the next question.

QUESTION: If I remember right, you've been an Apostle since President Kimball, so that means five different prophets of the Church and a number of different Presidents of the Quorum of the Twelve that you've had to give an account to. (ELDER OAKS: Yes.) Could you tell us what you've learned from being an Apostle with the Twelve in giving an account that we could then use in our employment? It must be interesting to go into those meetings with the responsibility that you have to give an account to the prophet of the Church, so any insights from those experiences that you've had working with those five different prophets and their different leadership styles that could help us in our experiences, I'd appreciate to hear.

ELDER OAKS: That's a good question—easier to ask than to answer.

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: It's specific, and I'm glad that it's yours to answer.

ELDER OAKS: I'll give one answer to that question. If I had time to think about it and consider what is confidential and what isn't and so on, I could give other answers, but one that occurs to me might possibly be helpful. I have observed in working with different Presidents of the Church that the Lord uses very different people in that calling. Howard Hunter and Ezra Taft Benson could not have been more different in so many of their approaches to giving direction and receiving reports. They came up out of a different set of experiences, and that showed up in the way they related to the people who reported to them. And in saying this, I'm not praising one and criticizing another; I'm just saying they were different, and that's what we all need to know.



If we get a new boss—we’ve all had that experience—we have to learn how to fit within the pattern of that new supervisor. It’s going to be different, and that’s not to say it’s better or worse. In fact, it’s going to be easier to work with in some areas and harder to work within other areas. You need to take more initiative with this boss than you did with that one. You need to understand a word of counsel different from this boss than from that boss.

I’ll give you an illustration of that. President Hunter as President of the Quorum of the Twelve, where I saw him for the longest period of time, rarely spoke during discussions. It was just a challenge to get him to express himself on matters being discussed. But when he did say something, you better listen very carefully because it was unusual for him to speak, and therefore you attach a greater weight to it and you treat it differently than a President who is fully participative in the discussion. He may be offering a five cent comment and a twenty-five cent comment, and you have the challenge of knowing is he really very serious about this, or is that just something to consider? When President Hunter spoke, it was always a five dollar comment because he didn’t do it very much.

Now that’s a general answer to the question, but it’s one that I feel free to speak about within the responsibility of confidentiality. We need to size up our leaders, and we need to be honest with them, of course. But the way we speak to them, the extent to which we speak to them, what we say to them—we have to learn how to do it.

I’ll give you one more example. I can’t think of the specific, but I made a presentation to the board of trustees—which was then the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles—when I was president of BYU. I used a word in that presentation, and it was a perfectly good word, and I thought I was communicating one thought in using that word, but I found that word meant something very different to the body that I was speaking to. That resulted in a serious misunderstanding of what I was trying to say, and I had to learn not to use that particular word because it didn’t communicate what I intended. Now, with a different group that word would have worked. It wasn’t an inappropriate word; it was just a word that had a connotation that I did not expect as a result of my particular professional background. It was early in my service at BYU.

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: Thank you. The next question.

WON’T CHANGE, THEN WHAT?

QUESTION: So, this is the question: We give people opportunities to change; we give them a lot of opportunity—maybe months, to change. We talk to them, we meet with them regularly, but they choose—either because of ability or whatever—they choose not to make those changes. I believe it’s our accountability to the organization, as well as to the individual, to help them move on to somewhere where they want to perform and want to do that. I would just like to get your thoughts and experiences on the idea that it is okay for us to terminate people when we’ve given them opportunities to change. We’ve helped them and we’ve tried them, so I’d just like to get your thoughts on that.

ELDER OAKS: Another good question. Why doesn’t someone ask a specific question? (laughter). I invite Brother Christensen to contribute to these good general questions. The answer is that we must have the alternative of separating a person from employment when, after a period of time and fair treatment and so on, they do not perform. That should be done with appropriate warning. It is simply unacceptable for us to give no input and then separate a person for something we should have advised them of and given them a chance to correct. We’ve sometimes been guilty of that.

We sometimes have had to separate. By “we,” I’m not talking the Church; I’m talking about all of my range of professional responsibilities. I’ve been on the point in separating people and looking at their file, and seeing nothing but



praise in their file. The same person who told me we had to separate them from their section had been giving them nothing but praising evaluations. That's not acceptable. If a person is not measuring up, we need to go through the steps that we've talked about here. Then along the line, we need to communicate—if it's pretty serious—that first of all, "If you don't improve this, it's going to interfere with your ability to perform your job and with our ability as a team to perform our work." And then the next step is "If you can't make this kind of improvement within a certain period of time, we'll just be compelled to invite you to look for other employment." I think we have to be upfront on that.

I'll give you an example that I had when I was executive director of the American Bar Foundation (a professional research organization in Chicago) while I was a law professor at the University of Chicago. I had leave to run this organization on a three-quarter time basis. I had about 20 doctoral level people who were professional researchers on issues of concern to the American Bar Association—all toward the empirical side of research in legal matters of interest to the legal profession. When I became the executive director, the board was very dissatisfied that the organization was not rigorous enough in requiring these professionals to do their work on time. The organization would often ask a question and be promised an answer in six months; a year and a half later, it had not been done. The board that I worked for—I was the chief executive officer in reporting to a board—they were pretty dissatisfied. I knew that I had to work with this problem, so I reviewed the work of all the professionals. And I'll just mention one case.

There was one fairly extreme case of a person who just promised and promised and never got the work in. I knew enough about the work that he was doing that I could see that he had had plenty of time, too much time, and so I had him come in. I reviewed what he'd been asked to do, the deadlines that he'd missed, and he described to me the work that needed to be done still, and it would take about six months to do it—never mind the fact that he'd had a year and a half to do it and he hadn't made much progress on it. He told me that six months he thought was a reasonable period of time to complete this task. And I said to him, "Well, let me tell you—on the basis of my evaluation of your work and what you've been doing with the organization—I want you to put something on my desk in 60 days in writing: either this completed job or your resignation—one or the other of those written documents should be on my desk in 60 days. And I think 60 days is a very reasonable period for you to accomplish it, and I know you feel differently, but ..." and so on.

Well, in about 45 days I got his resignation, and we got someone else who would do the work. That was a hard thing for him and for me. I've been talking about an extreme case. Brother Christensen, let me turn to you with a request that you talk about the less difficult, less abrupt alternatives.

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: I will do that even though we have some of the same circumstances that we would deal with here. A couple of comments that I would make is that too often in human resources, we will have a manager who will come to us and will say that I've come to the end of the road with this person and I want to terminate them. We will do just what you said, Elder Oaks, and we'll look into the files and it will be year after year and month after month of positive performance reviews. From a legal point of view—and frankly from an ethical point of view and my point of view—that creates a very serious problem, so it starts with not letting that happen. If there are problems, begin at the very beginning with true and honest conversations about what the problems are.

I'd go back to some of our earlier discussion. If we love the employee enough, we will talk about the problems early, so that that person can get better. When we do that, my assumption is that 95 percent of the time they will get better. But if we don't do that, we forego the blessing and the opportunity for them to become better. For those handful of times where they just don't get better, and that's really to the question that you asked—what do you do?



I remember going early on to the First Presidency with this question because a number of managers had said, “Ralph, as the new head of HR here, you need to understand that we don’t have the flexibility here to let people go.” And I said, “Well, that’s interesting.” So I went to the First Presidency and I said, “President Hinckley, I’ve been told that we can’t let people go in this organization, and I just really want to know where you Brethren are.” Their response was identical to what Elder Oaks just said. That first, let’s make sure that we take the time to correct and to help them become better. Second, potentially find another fit because sometimes they’re just in a bad job—the job and the person is not a good fit. I think we ought to be very patient with finding a better opportunity if there is that opportunity. But if a person has—and I liked the word you used—*chosen* either through a “don’t have the skills, and I’ve chosen not to build them,” or “I’ve just chosen to put the project off and not do it.” The First Presidency was very clear that we will let people go.

Now, how do we do that? We do that still in the spirit of love for them as people and as human beings, but we do let them go, and frankly, help them find other employment elsewhere. My experience in the Church is that I’ve seen many of you who have done that and have done it with compassion and have done it well, but have done it. I think that’s how I would answer the question.

ELDER OAKS: I have observed some very skillful handling of this kind of problem in my work at BYU and in the Church. We’re probably less skillful than some of the other experiences I’ve had, but I think we do this fairly well when we face up to it. But the most common problem I have observed is failing, and this is a failure of the supervisor—failing to acknowledge what is happening and just not facing up to it. If we face up to it, I think we can do a pretty good job. I have been gratified by the results of such actions. I’ve known a number of times in my life where people have been separated, and it’s been done according to the principles we’ve discussed here. Then later on, when they landed in a job they could do, one that gave them satisfaction and so on, they come back and thank you because they were suffering in this situation that they weren’t measuring up to, and they needed help. When they got to some other place, and they’re happier, they come back and thank you. Not all of them will come back and thank you, but I have had such experiences. It can happen.

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: That’s a great question. Thank you.

POSITIVE ACCOUNTABILITY

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: Other questions, please.

QUESTION: A lot of times, rendering an account can have a negative connotation where you’ve set goals and maybe you haven’t measured up, and the news is going to be hard, and that kind of thing. How can you change a culture where maybe rendering an account has a negative connotation and turn it into a positive culture where people are excited to render an account whether the account is full of complete good news or there is some bad news? Because they know ultimately it’s going to be an enriching experience, one where they’re actually going to be perfected throughout the process.

ELDER OAKS: That is a good question, and I will use the presiding authority’s prerogative to classify that as a specific question. I’ve been waiting for that opportunity.

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: And I’ll do what everyone should do, which is to take direction from the Brethren. Thank you. I think that the notion of shifting the culture from being negative to positive is in parts—it’s by learning some



of the things we've been talking about today. We live in a culture in the world that frames accountability in a negative way. I think about my experiences in the temple and the doctrine that is taught—accountability is a marvelous, important part of the doctrine that we teach.

Go to the 70th section of the Doctrine and Covenants and the 72nd section, where the Lord teaches about our coming and giving an accounting of our stewardships. And so I think part of it is really examining our hearts as to why do we make this a negative experience as opposed to joyfully seeking out that kind of input and seeking out even correction where correction is needed. I think we own the culture, and one of my biggest concerns is that we would reflect a growing culture in the world as opposed to the culture of the doctrine that we teach that does make accountability and stewardship reporting into a negative thing. I don't think that's our doctrine. As I experience it, I see this as an opportunity where we should seek out the chance to give an accounting of our stewardships.

ELDER OAKS: I think we should not underestimate the power of the broader culture, the worldly culture, that we work within. People who are sensitive to these issues have commented to me on how much of a change we've had in the relationship that young people have to their teachers and in parents' involvement. If a child is corrected in school, one way or another, that is analogous to the workers we see who need correction. In earlier times it was unheard of that the parent would take the part of the child and hire a lawyer to sue the school for what they were doing with the child. Now that's a very common kind of circumstance, so I think our rising generation is coming to us with a built-in hostility toward correction. Now that's not true of the generation we speak to here, but that's a worldly expectation that is working its way upward, and it makes the idea of accountability harder for us to deal with. It makes it more important that we teach it—expressly in our Church teaching and in our employment relationships.

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: My sense is that the Lord believes in accountability, that there will be an accounting that we'll all have and that we ought to be, my word is joyful, in finding that accountability. If there are gaps, I'd much rather find them now than later so I could work on them.

ELDER OAKS: Sure, give me time to repent.

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: To the culture comment: I've always enjoyed the scripture where Enos talked about his relationship with his father. And I think that is a culture message where he said he was brought up "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Enos 1:1). I find those two to be a really nice juxtaposition of nurturing. We do want a culture of nurturing, encouragement, and a positive side, yet a culture of admonition. My sense is that Enos appreciated the balance of those two.

Next question.

POSITIVE REACTIONS

QUESTION: Elder Oaks, you mentioned that when you were clerking for Earl Warren, you had a great longing to get some evaluation and some criticism. I know that's a very important thing for people—to know where they stand. I'm wondering about the positive side, because we talked a lot about the negative and about when there are shortcomings. What about when there are successes, how do we maximize the positive and build on that so people don't get proud, but they do gain greater confidence and go on to accomplish even greater things?



ELDER OAKS: Okay. You're saying, "How could he have helped me with positive evaluation that wouldn't have just caused me to swell up with pride but would have furthered my work?" I can understand that. It would have been easier to understand if he'd said, "I don't want you to write such long memos." That would have been an easy one to correct, but how could he have given me positive reactions to the content of what I had prepared without disabling me in self-satisfaction? Do I understand that now?

QUESTION: Yes.

ELDER OAKS: I think a way to do that would be to say, "I like what you did with this particular task, and I wish you'd apply more of that to these other tasks." In other words, take a positive but don't give it as an undiluted evaluation—take it as a basis to offer suggestions. You ought to be as good at the number one task as you are at the number three task. Praise number three and apply it to number one. That would be one way. But I can't be more specific because I'd have to wrestle with that problem.

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: I think that's a great answer. I think it is applying what you've seen in other opportunities.

Question at the top.

BALANCE AND UNITY

QUESTION: As a preface to my question, I believe that each of us has the responsibility to identify our own personal leadership style, and that effective leaders surround themselves with people with different styles. So, when receiving feedback from my leader, how do I discern and respond effectively to that feedback when they may be trying to get me to be like them, to adapt to their leadership style—as opposed to hearing or receiving feedback that will help me identify and improve my own leadership style?

ELDER OAKS: That's a good question. It's a matter of balance. We don't want to convey to our leader or to impose on the organization the burden of adapting to us. We want to adapt to them, to the task and to the leader. And so we may have to modify our style somewhat and perhaps temporarily to the leadership style of the immediate supervisor, but that is a matter of balance. We don't expect that someone is going to try to make us be someone we are not. But we may have to give more emphasis to this quality than to that quality when we would have preferred a different balance, in order to fit well within the organization. That's kind of a general answer and as far as I could take that. Brother Christensen, please be more specific.

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: The thought that came to mind as the question came up was leadership in the home. I'm thinking about my own home and how grateful I am to have a companion whose style is different than mine. I think that it begins by having the humility to recognize that my style doesn't have everything for everybody. It is incomplete. And I know in our home, that Teresa and I have been so grateful for her style, which is unique and different, and my style, which is unique and different, and we love seeing how the two styles play out in our children. I think it's the same here. I think you begin with the humility of saying I know that my style is not adequate. It is what it is, and I'm hoping to develop it and grow it. And I'm going to grow it by learning from other colleagues who have different styles. I think it starts with that humility of not assuming I have it all, as the leader, because I don't.

ELDER OAKS: Building on the analogy of the father and mother, I want to mention the word *unity*. The different style of a husband and wife is meant to serve God's purposes. But those styles need to be brought to bear positively



in the lives of children against the background of unity. You never want to get into a position where the children manipulate mom and dad because they go to dad for one thing and they know they get a different answer than if they went to mom. It's okay if they go to mom for comfort and to dad for the car keys—if that's the way things are set up in the household and everyone understands the division of responsibility there. But that analogy is helpful in an organization.

You have to be careful not to get certain specialists in giving one particular answer so that people go to you for that answer instead of going to the organization that's been established. You've got to have both unity and the different talent that is suggested by the husband and wife analogy. Against the background of unity, it is the Lord's system. With any other background, it's confusion and less-productive childrearing.

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: Thank you. Next, please.

PEER REVIEWS

QUESTION: In rendering an account, my thoughts are drawn to Joshua and his brethren reporting to Moses about the land of Canaan. I'm wondering how we can keep perspective, faith, hope, the Spirit, and so forth? In rendering accounts, we may be thinking we're telling it the way it is and also do so in an optimistic way. Both groups thought they were rendering an account. Some made it the way it was. But one, of course, was approved by the Lord.

ELDER OAKS: Yes, they viewed the land through different lenses. And maybe there was some personal interest involved in that. Maybe some of those men didn't want to go fight those people they had seen. So they gave a negative report that would keep Israel nibbling around the edge of the promised land until they grew too old for military service. I'm not sure. But we can guard against that kind of distortion in our organization if we have an active system of peer review. If a report is to be made to someone who will make a decision, it's well to get several different points of view. Maybe only one person goes to make the report, but before they do, they show it to A and C so that B's view of it is not the only view that reaches the decision maker. Peer review will help on that.

I suppose it would have been helpful to the Israelites who went to look at the promised land if they'd gotten together, and maybe they tried to get together and they just had to have two reports. We've all read congressional reports, where the majority reports one thing and the minority reports another. Maybe that's what they were doing, but peer review is very important on general subjects. You get it automatically if you have a group working together as a team. You get that automatically, but if one person thinks they've had the assignment to give their view of things and they never check with others to see if their view is unique or idiosyncratic, then the organization suffers.

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: There's an aspect to the first part of your question that I don't think was central to your question that struck a thought in my mind. We talked about keeping the Spirit in the conversation. I had an experience one time with a senior leader who told me, he said, "Ralph, I'm never going to do a performance review again." I said, "That's interesting; why would that be?" He said, "Because I tried it once." And I kind of smiled and said, "How did it go?" And he said, "Well, I was in the middle of this review and I was giving some needed correction, and the person became angry at me. Before I knew it, I was yelling at them, so I'm never going to do this again." And I paused and I thought, what's the problem here? Is the problem that they were given a review, or is the problem that I'm yelling at him? The notion of keeping the Spirit is really important as we do these things, some of which are very difficult. We want to do them in a way that keeps the Spirit and that maintains the Spirit in the entire conversation. There is no need for that to become an angry kind of conversation, even if we have different points of view. Even if we don't agree with the employee or our supervisor with the evaluation, there's no need for it to become an issue of contention.



I think we've got time for a couple more questions, please.

THE FAULT IS MINE

QUESTION: You mentioned from the lofty to the specific. Five decades ago when I was a missionary, my first five junior companions asked for and were given a new companion. Of course, they were the problem (laughter). It took me three and a half decades to figure out that I was the problem. How could I have learned that earlier and saved scores of people the agony of having to work with me as a supervisor who thought he was right?

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: That's a great question.

ELDER OAKS: You know, I was trying to classify that question as general or specific, and I saw a new three-fold classification—general, specific, and personal. I think we've all had that kind of experience in our lives where we look back on something and realize that the fault was mine; the problem was mine. It's a great part of growth in year ten if you can look back on year two and realize that. I've had a few experiences like that in my life—not as many as I wish I had. But I'm not sure how to teach someone how to recognize that in year one or year two.

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: The thought that came to my mind is that I think this whole conversation is a conversation of the heart. I think it's an exploration of "what is the state of my heart?" and "how do I get my heart prepared?" Earlier would be better, but better later than never. So how do I get my heart prepared to recognize—and I love the way you framed your question; thank you for the personal part of that—but have the humility to say that I recognize that I wasn't what I wanted to be. To me, it's schooling our heart as early as we can to be able to have those insights as early as we can. That would be my response.

ELDER OAKS: There's another aspect of this. There are probably people within your organizations who are at what I call year one or year two, and if they have a good friend and a supervisor to help them see something now, it will bless them and prevent them from looking back on this experience at year eight or year ten. So, in a way, that is central to what we're trying to talk about here.

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: Thank you. Exactly. I think we have time for one more question, please.

HIDDEN TALENTS

QUESTION: You talked about talents and about accountability, and certainly the parable of the talents puts that responsibility squarely on our individual shoulders. But as a leader both in business and in the Church over the years, how have you helped people discover—sometimes they don't see their own talents—how do you help people to see, discover, and multiply those talents, to kind of grow your people whether it be in the Church or business, generally speaking?

ELDER OAKS: That's a great question to end on. It is a big challenge to do that, and we're all so busy in our various responsibilities that unless we are careful to put that on our agenda, we don't do that for our employees. And we should. I would just suggest that each of you put down as something to think about when you allow yourself 15 minutes in the office without anything you're doing, just to kick back and prayerfully ponder whether there are some changes you can make within your organization that would help you discover the hidden talents of some who are there or help them discover them. It's something that doesn't happen in the routine operation of an organization. It happens for us



personally when we move from one job to another, and we find that we are suited for this task that we never dreamed we were—or that we're not suited for it, which thing we never supposed. In an organization with existing assignments, it just requires us to reach out for something that doesn't come naturally. What's your take on that?

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: Well, in some ways again I keep back to this theme of the heart. But it doesn't come naturally, and I think we are all in the process of learning to become, to become something that we're not today. And that would be my response.

ELDER OAKS: Thank you.

REMEMBERED FOR?

BRO. CHRISTENSEN: If I might say, the questions have been great. Thank you so much for them. And just prior to any concluding remarks, Elder Oaks, that you would have, I would just like to express, on behalf of all of us, our appreciation for you and our love for you—both our respect for the office that you have, but as a brother and a colleague to have taken time to have shared these insights. We appreciate that so very much; thank you very much. And we'd love any concluding comments you have, and then Brother Neilson for our prayer.

ELDER OAKS: Thank you. It just occurred to me that I could share with you something that has been very meaningful in my life, given to me by Elder Neal A. Maxwell, Commissioner Neal Maxwell as he then was. I had been appointed president of BYU for two to three years before this experience. Every week I would come to Salt Lake to meet with Commissioner Maxwell, with Joe J. Christensen, who was head of Seminaries and Institutes of Religion, and with other key leaders of Church education. Elder Maxwell, in that setting, would teach us things that he felt would benefit us in our leadership responsibilities. In a way, that little meeting of half a dozen people weekly had the same objective as this larger setting here.

One thing he taught us has stuck with me and benefited me a great deal. He said, "I would like each of you to write down what you'd like to be remembered for." He said, "It probably doesn't occur to you now, but it won't be very long before every one of you is released from your current position. One way or another you won't be there anymore, and it's worth thinking about today what you would like to be remembered for. I suggest you write down two or three things. Don't do anything with it except keep it and look at it once in a while."

I had no sooner begun to do that for my position at BYU when it occurred to me that that was an even more important question for my position as a father. I realized that in some of my relationships with some of my children, I was laying the foundation to be remembered for things that are not worth being remembered for: "pick up your clothes," "turn off the lights," et cetera. And that little bit of counsel, that question, brought about some significant changes in my behavior as a parent. It was also useful to me professionally because I thought about what does an educational leader want to be remembered for? There are a lot of things I had to do as an educational leader, but I didn't want to be remembered for them. They weren't worth being remembered for. They were important to the ongoing responsibilities that I had. But I wanted to be remembered for something more general and more elevated than the equivalent of the parental "pick up your clothes" or "turn off the lights" example that I gave earlier.

So I would suggest that each one of you, in your supervisory responsibilities, say to yourself, "Sometime I'm going to leave this job; what do I want to be remembered for? By those I've worked with, by those I've worked for, how would I want them to remember me?"



I remember one of the things I wrote as president of BYU was “I’d like to be remembered by the trustees as someone who always told them the truth, leveled with them about how things really are,” which was one of the questions with which we began this meeting. That is very fundamental in organizational relationships. But I give you that as a challenge.

CLOSING TESTIMONY

ELDER OAKS: I just close as you knew I would, by affirming that this is not just any corporation to work for. This is the work of the Lord. This is His Church—with the fulness of the doctrine and the power of the priesthood and the divine injunction to do, and to do perfectly, the work that the Lord has given us in all of our several responsibilities, according to the direction of His leaders. That is the spirit of your service. That’s the spirit of your employment. That’s the spirit of our gathering together in a leadership enrichment series.

I testify of Jesus Christ, who is our Savior. He is your Savior and my Savior. Because of His life and death and resurrection, we have the assurance of immortality. Because of His atoning sacrifice, we have the opportunity for eternal life, which comes to us in a continuous process of repentance—getting up and going forward when we fall down, and trying always to look on ourselves as someone who has greater potential than we are now fulfilling. We are all a work in process, and the principles we talked about here today I know to be true principles, and they arise out of what we know about who we are and what God expects of us in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Of that I testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

(Prayer)

Notes

1. David O. McKay, “Four Guideposts,” *Improvement Era*, Mar. 1969, 3.
2. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:478.
3. *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (1982), 489.